

The Haymarket Tragedy

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Chicago's evolution into a large city helped to place it as one of the nation's industrial leaders. Yet with this role came the responsibility of handling the many instances of labor unrest. When looking at the history of labor in Illinois, one must mention the incident that occurred at Haymarket on May 4, 1886. This single meeting brought about the first Red Scare in America and set back a growing labor movement.

So often in history the past directly influences the future and the Haymarket incident is no exception. For decades men cried for an eight-hour workday, and often it seemed as if these cries fell on deaf ears. In 1836 the *National Laborer* reported that twelve hours was too great a span of time to be engaged at the workplace, and claimed that "eight hours daily labor is more than enough for any man to perform." This ideal remained an issue for over the next fifty years. Yet the strength of these labor movements often rode in waves, causing varied effectiveness throughout the years. Some who were angered with the nation's current trends and with good reason, a great majority of the labor laws were inadequate. Out of this frustration rose those who chose to take a more radical view in regards to labor. Examples include socialist groups that contained elements of communism, socialism, and anarchism. These groups agreed that the capitalism and the wage system exploited the worker. This was the historical background of the events that occurred on that May 4, 1886, and many of these facts influenced the emotion and anarchist leaders of the Haymarket meeting.

Chicago began its history of labor unrest in 1877 when the forceful attempt by police to break up a strike resulted in the death of several workers. This event led to hostile feelings between the two groups and many workers began arming themselves for protection. A similar series of events led to the Haymarket tragedy. On May 1, 1886, workers in Chicago went on strike for an eight-hour workday; this day passed without incident. On May 3 a follow up rally was held by the striking Lumber Shovers' Union, and August Spies took the responsibility of the rally's speaker. Nearby was the main factory of the McCormick Reaper Works whose union workers had been locked out since February. Part of Spies' crowd broke away to join these workers in heckling their union replacements. The police response resulted in the death of two workers. August Spies, who believed at the time that six men had died, was outraged and wrote in his anarchist newspaper that if the strikers had been armed with "good weapons and a single dynamite bomb not one of the (guilty party) would have escaped his well deserved fate." Spies sent notice through his paper that a meeting would be held on May 4 in protest to police brutality.

The meeting was set to be held at Haymarket Square which lay between Des Plaines and Halstead streets in Chicago. This area could hold about twenty thousand people, yet only a disappointing 2,000-3,000 showed up to the meeting. Early confusion concerning who was the first scheduled speaker contributed to the small attendance. Much of the meeting went without incident until the police tried to break up the meeting with only a few minutes remaining and with only a few hundred spectators left. During this time a member of the audience threw a bomb amidst the officers. The bomb itself and the confusion and mayhem that ensued claimed the lives of eight police officers and terribly wounded others. This event caused widespread fear across the nation, and many citizens' sentiments echoed that of the *Chicago Tribune* that "no

effort should be spared until every man in the conspiracy has been clutched." Unfortunately, this pursuit proceeded blind to justice.

Scholars often consider the Haymarket trial as one of the most notorious miscarriages of law in American history. The actual bomb thrower was never found but the idea of not prosecuting anyone was unfathomable. In 1887 on November 11, August Spies, Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, and George Engel were hanged, not because of evidence linking them to the crime, but merely because of their political views. The executions of these men transformed them from anarchist into martyrs, not only in this country but throughout the world. The three remaining men who were imprisoned in relationship to this crime were pardoned by Governor John Peter Altgeld (with the exception of Louis Lingg who committed suicide the day before the hangings). Yet the hostility about this issue in Chicago was so strong that this decision ruined the Governor's political career.

When one looks back on the Haymarket Tragedy one must recognize that this single violent issue did more than just get "revenge" for the worker. Not only was innocent life lost on both sides but anarchists and those of similar political views were feared for the first time. This fear and anger ran so deep that innocent men were killed just to satisfy this witch hunt. This event also greatly hindered labor movements across the nation, proving that May 4, 1886, at Haymarket Square did not simply affect the people of Chicago but it affected the citizens of America.

[From Corrine J. Naden, *The Haymarket Affair Chicago, 1886*; Dave Roediger and Franklin Rosemont, *Haymarket Scrapbook*; Stevenson Swanson, *Chicago Days*.]